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ABSTRACT

The quality of education offered by a school district is measured by the extent to which all of its students become successful learners. Students' chances for success are often dependent on the district's assignment process. This paper presents findings of a study that identified the ways in which central offices encouraged administrators and teachers to seek access and use important instructional knowledge. Specifically, the study examined how five central offices: (1) organized instructional improvement efforts; (2) led those efforts; (3) developed normative support for improvement; and (4) affected the extent of teachers' and administrators' access to and use of the instructional knowledge related to those activities. Four suburban and one rural school system in the mid-Atlantic region were examined. Methods included: (1) interviews in 3 districts with 176 central office administrators, 138 principals, and 190 teachers; and (2) interviews in 2 districts with 9 principals, 7 central office administrators, and 123 teachers. The five districts exemplified the following approaches to school improvement: school choice, top-started/bottom-run, evolutionary change, bottom-started/bottom-run, and countering diversity. In conclusion, the central office's role in instructional improvement is most effectively enacted through giving a clear and consistent message that instructional improvement is the primary expectation for adults in the system. Second, the consistency of the message is a function of involvement, support, and communication. One table is included. (LMI)

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THE CENTRAL OFFICE ROLE IN INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT*

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THE CENTRAL OFFICE ROLE IN INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

The quality of education a school district offers is the extent to which all of its students become successful learners, with successful learners being knowledgeable, empathetic, self-determined, and strategic (Jones & Fennimore, 1990). If students' opportunities to engage in activities that encourage them to become knowledgeable, empathetic, self-determined, and strategic qualitatively vary among classrooms, programs, and/or schools, then students are at the mercy of the district's assignment process as to their chances of succeeding. We argue in this paper (1) that the instructional improvement role of the school district central office is to insure that every building and classroom substantially promotes students' chances of becoming successful learners and (2) that, based on our research in five school systems, a key way of accomplishing this is to facilitate staff members' access to and use of important bodies of instructional knowledge. The paper begins with our perspective on the central office's instructional improvement role. It next details the purpose of the study and defines key concepts related to that purpose. After briefly describing our research procedures, we offer case summaries of the five districts. The final section contains an explanation for differences in access and use across the districts.

Perspective

In most of the school systems with which we have experience, there is a hit or miss character to the quality of education. Depending on which school a child attends and to which classrooms the child is assigned, the student will encounter a varied array of programs and activities. The consequence is that all students may develop some of the characteristics of successful learners, but only some students will be fortunate enough to follow a route through the system that encourages the development of all four. From the students' perspective, then, the quality of their educational experiences rests on the "luck of the draw." The central office's instructional role is to remove this luck factor from the instructional program, i.e., to insure that idiosyncratic variations in programs, people, and policies do not result in systematic differences in the quality of education for children. The central office must be able to assure itself and others, for example, that (1) students with minimal basic skills are not relegated to a minimalist education; (2) "average" students have the same richness of education as the gifted; (3) students with a first-year teacher will have no less, or no more, access to engaging activities than students with a veteran teacher; and (4) a student with one fourth grade teacher will neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged in comparison to a student with another fourth grade teacher.

To achieve such consistency, the central office has to make certain that every instruction-related decision is informed by knowledge about how best to encourage successful learning. The "luck of the draw" becomes a major determinant of students' opportunities to succeed where there are vast variations in knowledge and skill across practitioners in the system. On the other hand, assignment to buildings and classrooms becomes a minor determinant of success where variation in practitioners' knowledge and skill

is minimal and where practitioners' access to new knowledge and practitioners' opportunities to improve their skill are uniformly high.

A central office may weave important instructional knowledge into practice through a variety of mechanisms: hiring the most knowledgeable and skilled people possible, promoting staff development, concentrating on curriculum development and implementation, improving supervision of staff, conducting program evaluations, and/or relying on wishful thinking. Whatever combination of mechanisms a central office uses, its' core concern is whether good instructional information is accessible and used in day-to-day school life. Our work examines the means through which central offices promote uniform access and use to instructional knowledge that purports to increase practitioners' ability to reach all children.

A word of caution. Having a uniform distribution of knowledge and skills does not preclude individuals from using a variety of personal styles, classroom activities, and/or content topics with students. Uniformity here refers only to the distribution and use of a knowledge base that can inform practitioners' work. A sameness in the knowledge base practitioners draw upon does not imply a sameness in the actions that flow from the knowledge base; rather it helps to establish a single set of criteria by which decisions are made. So, this perspective does not constitute a case for standardization and/or centralized decision making. Such bureaucratic solutions to instructional problems have generally proven to be of little educational value (Wise, 1979). To the contrary, the more "standardized" access to and use of knowledge about effective instruction is, the less likely centralized mandates will be needed to promote educational quality because the key ingredients for making good instructional decisions -- specific knowledge of students and extensive knowledge of good practice -- will be diffused throughout the system.

Study Purpose

The primary purpose of the study was to identify the ways in which central offices encouraged administrators and teachers to access and use important instructional knowledge. Specifically, we examined how five central offices (1) organized instructional improvement efforts, (2) led those efforts, (3) developed normative support for improvement, and (4) affected the extent of teachers' and administrators' access to and use of instructional knowledge attributable to those activities. The first three categories are drawn from the instructional leadership model devised by Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982). We have extrapolated their model from the building level to the district level and use it to understand how access to and use of instructional knowledge can be affected.

For definitional purposes, "instructional improvement organization" means the regular patterns of rules, roles, and relationships pertaining to planning, implementing, and assessing activities intended to improve instructional practice. That is, we attended to the formal and informal vehicles through which staff members routinely acquired knowledge and to the structural mechanisms (resources, policy, incentives, schedules, communication networks, etc.) through which use of this knowledge was encouraged. "Central office leadership behavior" means the ways in which central office staff members influenced the instructional behavior and

beliefs of practitioners. Our concern was with the specific actions of central office administrators. "Improvement norms" means the shared understandings among staff members about how important improvement is to the system and about how it should be conducted. We were most interested in the extent to which expectations developed for how a school system, rather than individuals, should go about improving.

We use information about a district's organizational arrangements, leadership behavior, and shared improvement norms to explain the extent to which teachers and administrators had access to and used instructional knowledge. Instructional knowledge refers to sets of instructional theories that have been generally accepted within the educational community as valid ways of promoting successful learning for all students. Such knowledge sets that were incorporated into the improvement activities of the districts we studied included the Madeline Hunter program, frameworks for understanding differences in learning styles, approaches to the writing process, higher-order thinking initiatives, and cooperative learning.

We define "access" as the extent to which staff members actually availed themselves of opportunities to acquire knowledge. It was not enough for the district to generate improvement opportunities that theoretically were open to everyone; for the information contained therein to be of value to the district, people actually had to come into contact with that information. Thus, access meant that staff members were physically present when a signifcant portion of the knowledge base actually was conveyed.

An extensive literature has grown up around the complexity of determining how individuals use knowledge to construct action. An important lesson contained in this literature is that knowledge use can take varied forms (e.g., Hall & Loucks, 1977; Weiss, 1977). We categorize educators' "use" in three ways: (1) acknowledged incorporation of instructional knowledge into instruction-related responsibilities, (2) increased awareness of ideas or practices that may become translated into practice in the future, and (3) perceived reinforcement of practices/perspectives already present in a person's professional repertoire. We also examined whether educators believed a common language for discussing instruction was emerging in their districts -- an indicator of a "shared" aspect to use that went beyond the individual classroom.

Study Procedures

Four of the systems we studied were suburban; one was rural. This homogeneity was an artifact of our selection strategy. We had three criteria for candidate districts: (1) a location in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States; (2) sufficient size to have the potential for considerable central office involvement in internally-initiated instructional improvement and yet small enough for us to have contact with a significant proportion of the staff members; and (3) a reputation for having a strong improvement focus in the opinion of regional educators. Thus, we wanted to examine districts that had the reputation for "doing instructional improvement right," whatever "right" meant to the person making the nomination. The districts that fit the two criteria tended to be suburban.

Our research relied on analysis of open-ended interviews with central office administrators, building principals, and teachers. Conducted over a

two-year period in 1989 and 1990, the interviews focused on four topics:

- a subject's personal involvement in improvement activities,
- a subject's view of who in the district played key roles in facilitating or hindering the usefulness of the activities for the classroom and how they did this,
- a subject's identification of problems the district faced in conducting instructional improvement activities, and
- a subject's assessment of the classroom effects of the activities.

The interviews did not always cover all four topics because of subjects' time constraints and degree of direct involvement in improvement. However, within each building, we made sure that we had multiple informants on each topic. Where initial interviews indicated that instructional improvement activities were distributed extensively throughout the district, we felt a need to talk to as many professionals as possible. Where the activities were more spotty and where we felt comfortable that we knew where those "spots" were, we interviewed as many knowledgeable informants as we could locate but limited the number of additional interviews. In three situations (Districts 1, 2, and 3), a substantial number of staff members had had instructional improvement experiences beyond the standard in-service days and perfunctory textbook selection committees that are typical in many school districts. Thus, we interviewed nearly every central office administrator, building principal, and full-time, classroom teacher (176 professionals out of 202; 138 out of 163; and 190 out of 217, respectively).

The situations in Districts 4 and 5 required different research procedures. Previous research we had conducted in District 4's lone secondary school involved interviews and classroom observations with almost every faculty member (85 of 92 teachers and all four administrators). This research documented the system's basic approach to instructional improvement at the secondary level which relied primarily on department-initiated activities (see Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone, 1988). The additional research in the system for this study extended interviews into the central office (three professionals) and into the elementary schools to see what types of activities occurred there (interviews with 25 of the elementary teachers -- about 40 percent -- in five schools and all three elementary principals); we conducted followup interviews with the eight department chairpersons at the secondary school to confirm that the departmental focus had remained in place. Our initial interviews suggested that there were "pockets" where instructional improvement was receiving attention. Thus, our interview strategy was to identify these pockets and to tap into them as much as possible in lieu of speaking with every teacher. Pockets of improvement also seemed to be the norm in District 5. In addition, District 5 was too large to contact all professionals. We eventually conducted interviews in nine of its 22 buildings, which -- at the central office's request -- were self-selected into the study. Our informants, not surprisingly, indicated that these were the most improvement-active schools in the district. Thus, we likely had a sampling bias in both Districts 4 and 5 erring on the side of overestimation rather than underestimation of

access and use. In all, we talked to 123 of District 5's 854 teachers, the nine principals, and seven central office administrators.

Key phrases from subjects' comments on instructional improvement organization, central office actions, and improvement expectations were recorded; these data then became the basis for our forming a composite picture of a central office's approach to instructional improvement. Study participants' verbal listings of improvement activities in which they had taken part during the past five years and their examples of how they had used any ideas gleaned from those activities constituted the data base for our assessment of knowledge access and use.

In the case summaries that follow, statements summarizing participants' opinions about the districts are accompanied by the numbers of teachers (t), principals (p), and central office administrators (co) who issued comments that we could have used as quotes in support of that statement. We provide actual quotes in some instances; in others, we only supply the numbers. We adopted this approach to combat the tendency for qualitative data analysis to under-represent the available information base in the typical "narrative-quote-narrative-quote" style of reporting (Huberman and Miles, 1984). Keep in mind that the numbers represent the pool of people from whom actual, similar quotes were available and not the overall pool of people who would have agreed with the statement. The latter number was not known. This was not survey research and not everyone had the opportunity to offer their opinion on every topic. The numbers therefore show how many quotes could have been included in the narrative in support of a point, had we chosen to do supply all of them. For example, saying that 40 teachers, three principals, and two central office administrators in District 1 felt that central office staff members used an encouraging and reinforcing tone in their observations of educators' instructional practice means that 45 people made unsolicited comments in the course of an open-ended, unstructured interview to that effect. That is a significant number of like statements to be made (out of 176 total interviews) without a specific stimulus being provided, in our opinion.

Case Summaries

This section presents case summaries for the five school systems. Each summary begins with a quote from a central office administrator that captures the core of the district's approach to instructional improvement and then attends to the organization, leadership, norms, and degree of access/use associated with that approach. Although all five districts had very positive reputations, they varied considerably in the ways instructional improvement was carried out. We tried to capture these differences by associating a key phrase with each. The approaches were "controlled choice," "top-started, bottom-run," "evolutionary change," "bottom-started, bottom-run," and "countering diversity."

District 1: "Controlled Choice"

> Teachers are busy teaching in the classroom. How do they know about the latest research? They're not going to get it unless you supply it. It is a function of the superintendent and the staff

to make sure they provide that information. (superintendent)

District 1's approach was the most systematic of the five systems in terms of insuring that every teacher had access to similar information about effective instruction and that every central office adminstrator (the superintendent, three assistant superintendents, and two directors) was involved in instruction-related activities.

Instructional improvement organization. The district required every staff member to go through an ongoing, multiple-day, staff development program delivered by administrators and a cadre of teachers. All teachers and administrators, prior to our study, had attended an effective instruction series (based on the Madeline Hunter program) and were in the process of receiving instruction on learning styles. There was also a new teacher induction program (including student teachers) that covered the staff development topics. Reinforcing staff development was clinical supervision in which a third of the faculty in each building engaged in pre- and post-observation conferences about classroom visitations with an administrator each year. Central office administrators conducted a significant number of regular classroom observations to enable the building administrators to have the time for clinical supervision. In addition to the above two initiatives, teachers regularly reviewed and/or revised the curriculum on a cyclical basis and devised test items based on the teacher-identified objectives for use in the district's criterion-referenced program evaluation.

Staff members mostly engaged in these school improvement initiatives during the school day. As one staff member said, "You can't do these things at the end of the day; if there is a commitment to do it, you must take teachers out of the classroom." This practice produced a tension between time spent teaching and time spent learning to teach. Indeed, a sizeable number of teachers (predominantly secondary) questioned whether they should be out of the classroom so much, up to nine days a year for some teachers (t=50, 43 secondary). District officials estimated that they spent about one percent of its $22,000,000 budget on instructional improvement.

Central office leadership behavior. Throughout these activities, the central office emphasized (1) "controlled choice," which according to the superintendent meant, "you can tell people that you want them all to get to point A, but let them choose how they plan to get there," and (2) the message that "instruction comes first." Summing up "controlled choice" was a teacher who noted, "You feel you have a say but you always know who's in charge." Yet the central office managed to walk the fine line between too much and too little control in moving the system. Interview subjects reported that while the central office initiated changes, set the boundaries within which others made decisions, and expressly reserved the right to make the final decisions about changes (t=64;p=4;co=4), the central office also solicited, listened to, and acted on others' feedback (t=62;p=2;co=4). One teacher explained, "They give all teachers an opportunity to become involved, to have a piece of the pie; I like to feel I belong to an organization...it's more like a team." Central office staff members also counteracted the possibility of being labeled "heavy-handed" by adopting an encouraging and reinforcing tone in discussing staff members' job

performances (t=40;p=3;co=2). Teachers specifically said that the potentially threatening aspect of having central office administrators in their classrooms was negated by the fact that the visitors were knowledgeable, complimentary, and positive in commenting on what they observed: "They all come and observe and are positive about what they see." Another teacher added:

> The central office is really in the classroom now and is really knowledgeable about teachers. They talk with them, work with them, and observe them. Staff development and curriculum work are the reasons for it. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind.

A second set of central office leadership behaviors reinforced instructional excellence as the focus of the district and moved it into the heart of classroom activities. Interview subjects supported their contention that "it is hard not to get the message that instruction is important here" by noting that the central office: (1) showed a willingness to spend what was necessary for instructional materials, staff released time, and special programs (t=60;p=2;co=3); (2) modeled appropriate instructional behavior in staff development activities and in classrooms (t=47;p=4;co=5); and (3) followed up on instructional expectations in frequent formal and informal observations and by assigning projects that applied staff development information (t=51;p=1;co=5). Essentially teachers were saying that interactions with central office administrators concerned instructional rather than administrative matters -- "they are supervisors, not snoopervisors," one teacher concluded.

Improvement norms. "We are fine-tuning constantly and keep finding new ways to improve the system...the district is very open to new input." A host of interview subjects echoed this view of the system, claiming that the district was characterized by mutual respect for each others' views (t=13;p=3;co=2), collegiality (t=16;p=1), working hard (t=35;p=2;co=5), and a commitment to excellence (t=62; all administrators). But more important than these overtly verbalized views on the improvement "culture" in District 1 were the emerging expectations that were reflected in the previous two sections above: namely, (1) all teachers and administrators should be actively engaged in acquiring new information about instruction; (2) the district should take the lead in providing the forums through which information was to be acquired; and (3) improving instruction should be the sole rationale for justifying decisions. In other words, a set of understandings about how a school system, in addition to individual practitioners, should improve was being developed.

Access/use. Of the 166 teachers interviewed, 156 had been involved in curriculum and/or staff development in the previous five years, with 120 already having had training in the currently-in-progress learning styles program. The knowledge seemed to have been put to widespread use, and usage was evenly distributed across the five buildings -- with 55 teachers explicitly providing examples of how they had changed their teaching approach (e.g., using multiple strategies in the same lesson to capture the interests of more students), 57 saying that they had gained a better understanding of how students learned, and 34 claiming they had become more

aware of the importance of skills they already possessed. Reflecting on the type of classroom changes most teachers seemed to be making, a teacher commented: "Teachers are now designing lessons with different learning styles in mind; they are more analytic about what they are doing." Moreover, every administrator described how instructional information had become a part of their classroom observations. The perception that many staff members were using the same bodies of information to make changes coupled with the general sense that instruction came first produced a significant "system" result: the development of a common language to discuss instruction (t=44;p=4;co=1), which led to a shared belief that the district was moving in a uniform and purposeful direction (t=47; all administrators). A teacher commented:

> Finally, we have common ground on which to be evaluated. It is the first time in my 30 years that there has been a good common ground. And it did effect some good teaching. It made teachers aware of common elements of good teaching.

District 2: "Top-started, Bottom-run"

> We want to create the best teaching and learning environment possible. (superintendent)

District 2 initially required all of its teachers to participate in training on effective instruction but teachers' criticism eventually moved the system to a more voluntary approach wherein smaller groups of volunteers had access to a wide variety of instructional topics. The central office (the superintendent, an assistant superintendent, and a director) was not highly visible in the activities, relying on extensive teacher participation in peer coaching to reinforce new learnings.

Instructional improvement organization. Staff members indicated that the district's instructional improvement "mode" was for the superintendent to suggest a possible new program (t=36;p=4;co=3), to organize a task force (typically involving at least two people from each building) or to assign the idea to an existing committee to assess its potential value for the district, and then to place staff members in charge of implementing the initiative if the project became a "go" (t=38;p=2;co=3). Commenting on this "top-started, bottom-run" style of improvement, a teacher said: "Teacher-directed is really true; if we said it [the topic a task force was investigating] was nonsense, we wouldn't have gone into it."

Peer coaching was an extremely important component of the district's organization for improvement. Teachers had the option of using peer coaching as their means of supervision, and nearly 75 percent of the teachers did so. This enabled information to spread beyond participants in particular projects, occasioned constructive and "nonthreatening" critiques of teaching, and promoted guided practice with instructional techniques. In other words, peers provided follow-up on the yearly multitude of within-district curriculum and staff development activities, e.g., learning styles, Madeline Hunter, questioning techniques, and the writing process.

Much of the activity took place during the school day -- which the

superintendent claimed was the most effective time to engage professional staff in learning. Yet 29 teachers opined that the district tried to do too much in the time available for people to participate. Central office administrators estimated that about one percent of their $12,000,000 budget went for stipends, substitutes, consultants, travel for conferences, etc.

Central office leadership behavior. Credited with making a wide range of learning opportunities available to staff members (t=56;p=2;co=3), the central office also was noted for strongly encouraging staff participation in the activities (t=34). Early on, encouragement took the form of a mandate, which engendered resentment among faculty members -- especially when administrators started to use the terminology in evaluations. The central office backed off and, instead, offered incentives for participation, e.g., stipends, release time, money for special materials, recognition, and opportunities to play lead roles in program (t=15;p=1;co=2). As the superintendent explained:

> The expectation is that every building should be involved but that it would be unrealistic to involve every teacher. Everyone who wants to can, but we won't beat the heads of the 10 to 20 who are in the "coast" stage. I no longer chase that tail. There are too many good people to look out for.

The central office was also credited with providing more than adequate resources to support school improvement activities (t=51;p=1;co=1). A principal noted that "we get anything we ask for to help kids improve," and a teacher agreed: "The district sends me to Timbukto with a credit card and tells me to learn." But, the central office leadership role was mostly invisible once an improvement initiative began. In fact, a problem with the "bottom-run" part of the approach was that the central office appeared to be remote to building staff members and tended to be viewed by these people as leaving programs alone once they were underway (t=21).

Improvement norms. The overall improvement climate was marked by a desire to be innovative (t=43;p=1;co=2), a willingness to try new instructional strategies (t=33;p=2;co=1), generous instructional support (t=21;p=3), mutual respect (t=13), and an emphasis on excellence (t=27). So, the district seemed to be creating the kind of environment for teaching and learning that the superintendent hoped to see. Summing up the tone of the system was one staff member who said, "We applaud failure because that is how we learn." Predictably, District 2 staff members had a heightened expectation that if a particular initiative was going to succeed it would be at the insistence of building rather than central office people.

Access/use. One hundred and fourteen of the 131 teachers interviewed indicated that they had recently taken part in staff development activities beyond short, one-shot inservice programs. Also, 69 stated that they actively engaged in peer-coaching as their main means of supervision. Thus, access to new information was achieved not only through workshops but also through informal teacher interaction. Seventy-seven teachers offered specific examples of changes in their teaching approaches because of the information gained from the activities, 15 additional teachers said that the activities reinforced continued use of some existing skills, and 14 other

teachers indicated that the activities had made them more aware of components of effective instruction. These 106 teachers were evenly spread across the district's five buildings; no building had less than 70 percent of its teachers claiming use. Use among administrators was less apparent. Principals seemed to be using terminology drawn from the various bodies of instructional knowledge in their observations, but the central office administrators' limited direct involvement in instruction made it difficult for them to apply the information explicitly. Additional benefits "beyond" individual use accrued to the system from all of the activity: Interview subjects reported they were beginning to develop a common language for instruction (t=18;p=3;co=1).

District 3: "Evolutionary Change"

> All of our efforts continue in an evolutionary fashion; they become the jumping off points for new ideas. Evolutionary change makes the shift less uncomfortable. I believe that most peoples' worklives haven't changed all that much. (superintendent)

The central office (the superintendent, two assistant superintendents, two directors, and eight curriculum supervisors) concentrated on making formal organizational changes intended to create an appropriate environment within which instructional improvement would occur. While district administrators were avid supporters of professional staff development, teachers typically accessed new information in out-of-district forums.

Instructional improvement organization. Structural changes consumed much of the district's attention. As examples, the district reconfigured the grade level makeup of its schools using a lengthy process that solicited and used the input of a host of staff and community members, and deleted the position of department chairperson in order to create curriculum supervisors who could better encourage K-12 articulation.

The organization of staff development was much less formal. "Instructional techniques are gotten more through outside courses than [through] inservices or courses offered through the district," was one teacher's summation. While acquiring new ideas was definitely encouraged, according to interview subjects, the individual focus negatively affected sharing the ideas with colleagues. Only nine teachers noted specific instances when such sharing was formally arranged. Sharing did occur naturally and more frequently in two schools that had vibrant teacher teams. Of 29 teachers who pointed to teams as forums within which ideas gained elsewhere could be spread, 21 were from two of the district's six schools. Overall, however, a teacher concluded: "It only does that one person [who attended a workshop] good...Especially these days when we get so much stuff at conferences, we need to share that." The central office allocated resources to support teachers' staff development activities and streamlined the procedures by which staff requested support. (The actual portion of the district's $26,000,000 budget that went to instructional improvement could not be estimated, as the funds were spread throughout individual program budgets.) The district encouraged curriculum improvement by making opportunities available for staff to work together in revising the

curriculum (often during the summer or on inservice days) and circulating as much information as possible about new developments in people's respective fields -- a function taken on by the new supervisors.

Central office leadership behavior. The district office provided direction for "the big picture" (t=16) and left building staff members largely responsible for determining the substance of daily activities (t=53;p=3;co=3). Staff members applauded the central office's staunch support of teachers, in line with the superintendent's view of the central office's role: "We have administrators to support teachers, not to detract from their work." Staff repeatedly talked about how they were encouraged to grow professionally, without pressure or penalty when new ideas failed (t=82;p=4;co=5). As one teacher commented: "There's a feeling that permeates the building; a feeling that I'm being encouraged." Or as another teacher said: "I've never felt pushed into anything; there's been no risk attached when I try something ... Here's a great opportunity; we hope you take advantage of it."

However, the central office did a lot of its improvement-related work out of teachers' sight. One teacher, whose participation on a committee had allowed a behind-the-scenes peak, commented: "They do a lot that we don't think touches kids, but it does affect them; I only learned this by working with them." Consequently, a "Jekyll and Hyde" quality was attributed to the central office, with 38 teachers claiming the central office was remote from the classroom while others (t=18;p=4) stated that central office administrators were highly accessible when the need to talk arose.

Improvement norms. An environment was established that rewarded the pursuit of new ideas (t=27;p=4;co=3), and there was a strong sense that the district stood for quality (t=32;p=3). No one expressed dissatisfaction with working in the system. Teachers claimed that they felt respected and that there was a feeling of a true community to find the best ways to instruct children (t=36;p=2;co=3): "The ongoing philosophy here is that they (administration) care about the people they hire." Missing, in comparison to the previous two districts, was a widely-shared belief that knowledge acquisition was systemic.

Access/use. Of the 171 teachers interviewed, 78 mentioned specific participation in staff development beyond district inservice days. It was hard to pin down what information they had had access to, given the variety of specific subject areas and/or general teaching techniques addressed in the events. Even within the district there were at least ten staff development topics noted by teachers, any one of which had from a handful to twenty staff indicating they had been exposed to them. To the extent that curriculum review committees occasioned encounters with new instructional information, another 38 teachers beyond the 78 above had access.

Use was more difficult to assess. Interviews uncovered 25 specific examples of actual incorporation of ideas into classroom instruction gained through district-sponsored activities, a substantial portion related to a new elementary health program. Nineteen teachers noted instances of "self-improvement," a term that referred to their attending a particular workshop or course on their own and trying out new ideas in their classrooms. Significantly, there were no teacher mentions of situations in which both teachers and administrators accessed and used a similar body of

instructional information. Indications of a common language to discuss instruction were absent in District 3. One teacher stated:

> Staff development advances the issue of improving instruction over a series of time and is formally planned. We've done some things on some days and other things on other days. One of the things I see is a lot of teachers haven't been exposed to current things in teaching. There is not a common basis for discussion.

District 4: "Bottom-Started, Bottom-Run"

> I think recognizing that some people really know what they're doing [is important] and part of my job is to stay out of their way and at the same time lend support. I'm not sure I'm central but I'm in there somewhere.

Teachers, and occasionally a building administrator, were the driving forces behind school improvement activities in this district. Although teachers in every building reported significant encouragement for improvement in general, their activities indicated that the focus of improvement varied from building to building and teacher to teacher.

Instructional improvement organization. The central office consisted of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for business (who was also the secretary for the board of education), and the director of curriculum, who had the primary responsibility for overseeing curriculum revision. A potpourri of improvement opportunities were available: (1) two to three district in-service days a year on teacher-selected topics; (2) voluntary after-school courses proposed and taught by an administrator or a teacher (for which pay scale credit was given); (3) one outside conference a year; (4) voluntary curriculum review committees; (5) monthly instructional leadership meetings for administrators and department chairpersons; (6) occasional idea-sharing sessions at faculty meetings; (7) informal teacher groups to discuss instructional ideas; and (8) a multi-day, new teacher induction program that addressed instructional topics. A district-wide series of Madeline Hunter training sessions had taken place one year prior to the study, and a committee of teachers and administrators had decided to incorporate some of the ideas from that training into the district's staff evaluation procedures.

As teachers described the district's "bottom-started, bottom-run" approach, ideas "bubbled up" from the schools and the district would sometimes "fill the breech" by organizing a committee, allocating in-service time, or allowing observation visits to other districts (t=13) in order to more extensively address a topic. An administrator described the start-up of a writing initiative:

> [The teachers incredibly competent and I take their lead. [Process writing] was started five years ago by a teacher...[who] tried it and became excited about it and went into a second year of doing it. By the third year the school tried a 'grass roots proliferation.' The curriculum coordinator helped with materials.

We made presentations at the schools and the district adopted it.

However, two specific problems were associated with the approach. One was that, as a teacher noted, the district offered "a patchwork of opportunities" in which topics appeared and disappeared almost at random. Second, the opportunities attracted only motivated teachers with time flexibility (personally and professionally). The district had the smallest budget of the five in the study -- approximately $11,250,000. Money for instructional improvement dotted various budget categories and, thus, the amount was indeterminable.

Central office leadership behavior. Staff members said that the superintendent delegated the daily operation and improvement of schools to principals (t=13;p=3;co=1), was rarely visible in the schools (t=10), and was more attuned to business issues than instructional ones (t=10;p=1). The superintendent described the role as being a "reactor," and "staying out of the way" of the school people, and "supporting" their efforts. On the other hand, the curriculum director was viewed as involved in instructional matters, especially at the elementary level. This person oversaw the curriculum review committees (t=9;p=3;co=1), was continually circulating notices of staff development opportunities and curriculum ideas (t=8), and occasionally taught some of the within-district courses. While interviewees praised the amount of money and other support flowing to improvement (t=8;p=3;co=2), they stated that improvement leadership occurred at the building level: "teachers are the driving force" (t=13;p=2;co=2) and "teachers take the ball and run" (t=9). As one administrator put it: "What we do is nourish the strengths and encourage people and hope as many join in; I can't dictate it."

Improvement norms. The central office was careful to not contradict a well-embedded improvement culture that celebrated teacher control over the curriculum (t=12; p=3; co=1), a desire to enable children to succeed (t=5), and open sharing of ideas (t=8; p=1). What the district office added to the existing cultural mix was the possibility of innovators receiving help in spreading their ideas among their colleagues. Summarizing people's views of improvement in the district, one administrator stated:

> Now the feeling is, if you come up with a good idea, there are ways the district will support you. I see evidence of it all the time. People are working like crazy. I would hope that's part of a professional attitude. We're always working to find a better way.

There was an ingrained sense that improvement was a building responsibility. The extent to which a building-level focus developed in the district was perhaps best captured by three teachers in each of three different elementary schools who referred to the faculty and students as their "family" and noted an "affinity for the school rather than the district." (For an in-depth description of the form this culture took at the secondary level in this district, see Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone, 1988.)

Access/use. Access to new knowledge was provided through the

curriculum review committees for 26 of the 33 teachers interviewed. These projects, as in the other districts, sometimes were limited routine textbook selection as opposed to more substantive interaction about instruction. "Pockets" of teachers had access to instructional information through the host of other voluntary activities, e.g., approximately 10 of the teachers interviewed in a peer coaching course (an administrator estimated 20 teachers district-wide had participated), a similar number in a cooperative learning course, and a set of teachers within a school pursuing a different way to teach writing. Access for all administrators, plus the secondary department chairpersons (who had supervisory responsibilities), was created through the monthly instructional leadership meetings. New teachers' access to pertinent knowledge on instruction was formalized through the induction program. Thirteen of the teachers, three of the principals, and one of the central office administrators described specific ways in which staff members had changed their instruction on the basis of participation in recent improvement activities. Building administrators encouraged teachers to use new information and tried to help it spread beyond the pockets (t=11;p=4;co=1). Several informants claimed that multiple languages to discuss instruction were emerging within respective groups but that there was not one that could be considered to be in use districtwide.

District 5: "Countering Diversity"

> I wanted the curriculum guides to look the same so that across grades would be similar. Eventually the plan is to have one curriculum guide. It was very fragmented before. The district was ripe for a change. (curriculum director)

This district, at the instigation of the curriculum director, set a variety of instructional improvement initiatives in motion; however, because the system had a longstanding tradition of independent, neighborhood schools, implementation of these programs and policies varied widely from school to school. How intensively a particular school reinforced or promoted school improvement was primarily a function of the principal's interests and/or special improvement grants the school had received. Thus, the improvement efforts in District 5 had to navigate a tension between uniformity and diversity.

Instructional improvement organization. The central office was the largest in the study: a superintendent, two assistant superintendents, three directors (elementary, secondary, and curriculum), and 17 curriculum coordinators. Key components of the district's school improvement effort included (1) voluntary, paid instructional improvement workshops held in the summer (teachers new to the district received a truncated version of this training); (2) four in-district workshops a year; (3) some paid, out-of-district workshops; (4) curriculum revision committees; and (5) mini-grants ($100 to $200) for people to try new ideas. Only $103,000 of the system's $72,000,000 budget went to all of these efforts, and this constrained the number of volunteers who could take the summer workshops.

The school buildings assumed a major role in determining the availability of and/or follow up to improvement activities. "All schools

have been marching to their own drummer," said one central office administrator. Some schools had an extensive improvement focus: e.g., two buildings that had obtained special improvement grants; an elementary school where teachers met informally in the morning to discuss instructional techniques and where the principal substituted in classrooms to free teachers for peer coaching; and another elementary school where monthly faculty meetings were devoted solely to staff development. Other buildings did much less in the way of structured instructional improvement opportunities. A principal commented: "The problem is with implementation at the school level; there is no requirement or mandate to practice it...no model for schools to follow ... initial training is good, but there is no implementation and follow through [in all buildings]."

Central office leadership behavior. The central office conveyed a mixed message about the importance of school improvement to staff. The superintendent focused on political matters, particularly those pertaining to the school board. The superintendent acknowledged, "I act as an advocate and salesperson to the board." On the other hand, the director of curriculum was given a free reign to initiate, oversee, and promote many of the school improvement activities in the district. Staff members acknowledged the curriculum director as the "driving force" and the "visionary" behind all of the district-wide improvement initiatives (t=21;p=8;co=6). Nevertheless, teachers' observations about central office school improvement behavior mostly dwelt on the absence of the direct, visible involvement of central office administrators (t=32;p=3;co=1): "They have lost touch with the reality of every day, with what is going on in the trenches," said one teacher. It was the curriculum coordinators who received credit for actually being in the schools. "They are," said a staff member, " the guiding force in updating our curriculum guides; they're always looking at new materials and providing updated materials and (information about) inservices out of state and in" -- a perspective that 27 teachers and two principals held. Yet, according to other interview subjects, the curriculum assistants' support was highly variable (t=24;p=3). One claimed: "Some are always in the buildings to help, others are only around when they are called upon."

Overall, central office staff members specifically but indirectly facilitated teacher involvement in school improvement activities by providing various types of support, primarily paying teachers, reimbursing expenses, and providing substitutes (t=50;p=7;co=3). In addition, the central office played a key role in keeping staff members up to date through notifying them of professional development opportunities that the district would likely support (t=29;p=3;co=2).

Improvement norms. An openness to new ideas had been encouraged -- in part due to the number of teachers receiving the instructional improvement training, but the development of such an environment varied by the extent of a school's involvement in improvement. Interviewees reported considerable variability across the schools (t=23;p=5;co=4). Principals were free to encourage building-specific initiatives if they chose to do so. Of 27 teachers who specifically noted events in their buildings where district-initiated curriculum and staff development ideas were discussed and modeled in the classroom, 24 worked in only four of the nine buildings in

which we conducted interviews. Thus, there were multiple "subcultures" related to improvement in the district.

Access/use. Teachers' access to and use of new information related to effective instruction was extensive in some schools and spotty in others. Of the 123 teachers we interviewed, 58 stated that they had been involved in at least one session of the summer instructional improvement staff development program, 10 more had been accepted to attend the next session, and five had taken part in the new teacher induction sessions. In three of the schools (two elementary and one middle), almost every teacher had taken part; other schools had participation rates of about 25 percent. (All but three of the principals had attended by the end of our study.) Twenty-five teachers that had not attended the summer sessions indicated that they had taken part in out-of-district conferences in which bodies of instructional information were conveyed to them. In addition, another set of 11 teachers who had not attended staff development sessions either in or out of the district had participated on curriculum revision committees. Overall, then, 109 of the 123 teachers interviewed could be said to have had some access to instructional knowledge in recent years.

Of these teachers, 38 said that they had actually altered their instruction, in terms of lesson plans, activities, and/or techniques; 14 others said that the new information had reinforced certain instructional strategies they were already using; and 16 claimed that their awareness of ideas that could promote effective instruction had been increased. Once again, use varied by buildings, with 25 of the teachers who had altered their instruction coming from just three of the buildings (the same three noted above for high access). Six principals indicated that they had incorporated instructional information into their supervisory and observation practices as well. Seven teachers and five principals reported that a common language for discussing instruction was beginning to emerge in the district.

Discussion of the Case Summaries

The above case summaries highlight differences in five school districts' approaches to school improvement: controlled choice, top-started/bottom-run, evolutionary change, bottom-started/bottom-run, and countering diversity. At the same time the summaries note variations in educators' access and use of instructional knowledge. This section summarizes these variations and then posits some explanations for them, based on differences in the school systems' organization for improvement, central office leadership behavior, and improvement norms.

Differences in Access and Use

The following table (Table 1) compares the districts on five categories: veteran teachers' access, newly-hired teachers' access, administrators' access, teachers' use, and administrators' use. We assigned an adjective to each district for each category based on our aggregate assessment across all interviews. With respect to access, the terms "all," "most," and "few" refer to our estimates of the number of staff members relative to the totality of people in their respective role group who actually availed themselves of opportunities to encounter new knowledge. It

does not refer simply to whether there were opportunities available. All of the districts made opportunities available to all of their staff members; the difference was in how many staff members actually participated in such activities beyond traditional inservice days. Concerning use, "widespread" means that many staff members across all levels and job specialties incorporated the information into their instruction-related responsibilities; "spotty" means that either a smattering of staff members district-wide incorporated the information into instruction-related responsibilities or there were pockets (a school, a program, a grade level, or a department) where use was widespread.

Table 1
Patterns of Access to and Use of Information about Effective Instruction

DISTRICT	CURRENT TEACHERS' ACCESS*	NEW TEACHERS' ACCESS	ADMINISTRATIVE ACCESS	TEACHERS' USE	ADMINISTRATIVE USE	COMMON LANGUAGE
1	All	All	All	Widespread	Widespread	Yes
2	All	All	All	Widespread	Widespread-Bldg. level	Yes
3	Most	Few	Some	Spotty	Spotty	No
4	Some	All	All	Spotty	Widespread-Bldg. level	Multiple
5	Some	All	Most	Spotty	Spotty	Beginning

* Districts are ordered on the basis of Current Teachers' Access

In District 1, every teacher had access to knowledge about instructional techniques through the staff development and new teacher induction programs. Likewise, every administrator had access through initial administrative training and serving as trainers. Based on our interviews, many teachers from a variety of grade levels and program areas had discovered ways to incorporate the information into their instructional activities, and all administrators used the information as the basis for comments to teachers following classroom observations. Consequently, a common language to discuss instruction had developed in the system.

Teacher access in District 2 was similar, due to the initially-required participation in the Madeline Hunter training and to the teacher induction program. Most of the veteran teachers also seemed to have participated in at least one of the voluntary programs. All of the administrators took part in the Hunter training; however, only some were active in some of the current initiatives. Teacher use was found across all grades and departments. Actual administrative use was most evident at the building

level in teacher evaluations and faculty meetings. Central office administrators were in less of a position to demonstrate use of new knowledge in instructional settings because of the way they had come to define their roles as initiators and supporters of improvement. Nevertheless, the development of a common language of instruction seemed to be taking place in this district.

We found that an increasing number of District 3's teachers were beginning to attend outside conferences and workshops. The same opportunities were available to newly-hired teachers, but the absence of an instructionally-substantive induction program and the proclivity of new teachers to "stay close" to their students suppressed these teachers' participation. All administrators had access to considerable information relevant to the management of their schools; it was less clear that all administrators had participated in activities with direct instructional implications. With the exception of teams at the middle school and one elementary school, the "spotty" rating meant that use of certain information was almost randomly distributed across the district. In the two schools where idea sharing was reinforced both formally and informally, pockets of use emerged. There was no mention of the emergence of a common language.

In District 4, veteran teachers participated in knowledge acquisition activities as a group less than new teachers as a group -- an anomaly attributable to voluntary workshops and a required new teacher induction program. All administrators, plus the department chairpersons, attended monthly instructional leadership sessions. Thus, their access was high. Use among teachers was spotty, given that only some availed themselves of staff development opportunites. Administrative use was widespread at the building level as indicated by incorporating "Hunteresque" issues into the evaluation form and occasionally devoting faculty meetings to instruction. Central office use was less, an expected consequence of the superintendent's acknowledged distance from day-to-day school activities. It was most appropriate to say that several instructional languages were sprouting within specific pockets of use.

District 5's curriculum director hoped that every teacher would participate in the system's voluntary, summer workshop. To date only about half had. New teachers received a truncated version of the workshop. Administrators were encouraged to attend various activities both within and outside the district; our information was that most had attended at least one session of the summer instructional effectiveness workshop. Use of new instructional knowledge gained through staff development appeared to be substantial among those staff members who participated, but relative to the district at large, such usage had a "spotty" appearance, with some buildings having a much greater proportion of teachers' evidencing use than others. The overall effect was to create "pockets" of use within the system; common ways to talk about instruction were cropping up in these niches.

Promoting Access and Use Through a Consistent Message

Looking at the five approaches as a whole, "controlled choice" (District 1) and "top-started/bottom-run" (District 2) were associated with the the most extensive levels of access and use among teachers and administrators, and in both situations a shared instructional language

sprouted. The distinguishing characteristic of the two approaches was the presence of a consistent message that instruction and its improvement were foremost in the local educational enterprise. All five districts obviously wanted staff members to take instruction seriously, but the consistency with which that message was communicated as the top priority varied. This consistency depended on (1) the degree of administrative involvement in instructional improvement initiatives, (2) the allocation of resources -- especially staff time -- to improvement purposes, and (3) the types of communication opportunities staff members had to discuss and demonstrate improved instruction. In Districts 1 and 2, involvement, support, and communication meshed to alert staff members that instructional improvement was unavoidable. Each of the other districts had distractions that weakened interview subjects' sense of an unquestioned commitment to instruction: e.g., the remoteness of the central office from the classroom and almost exclusive reliance on volunteers. The difference was between a message that said "people will improve in this district" and one that said "people may improve in this district, if they choose to do so."

Administrator Involvement. When administrators rolled up their sleeves and jumped with both feet into the improvement arena, teachers noticed. Such involvement took several forms: actually participating in professional development as a learner; daring to model effective instruction techniques in front of other adults; and appropriately applying instructional knowledge in classroom observations. This factor also seemed to be the catalyst that moved use from being an individual to a shared phenomenon, in terms of developing a vibrant common language for instruction. (It is interesting to note that in both Districts 4 and 5 an indication of a common language showed up in buildings where principals behaved much as all District 1 administrators did.) Teachers began to view principals and central office people as knowledgeable about instruction. As Dornbusch and Scott (1975) demonstrated, the more knowledgeable an evaluator is perceived to be by the person being evaluated, the more likely that the evaluation will be perceived as valid and a basis for altering behavior. Thus, while some administrators became involved in some professional development activities in each of the five districts, the difference in Districts 1 and 2 were the extent and intensity of involvement. All administrators were engrossed in improvement in District 1. Fewer administrators were directly engrossed in improvement in District 2 but the system had structured opportunities for teacher leaders to assume some of the modeling and feedback roles central office administrators played in District 1.

Use of Resources. Resources included money spent on instructional improvement, material support given to these initiatives, and the judicious allocation of time for instructional improvement. All five central offices were viewed as being highly supportive of curriculum and professional development. But, the type of resource use that seemed to be most directly related to differences in staff access and use was how the districts dealt with staff time to learn about effective instruction, i.e., whether substantial staff development occurred during the school day. While all districts occasionally employed this strategy for a handful of teachers, Districts 1 and 2 trained all or most of the staff in this manner over the course of several years. In the other three districts there were very

dedicated groups of teachers and administrators who pursued new instructional ideas either after school, on weekends, or during the summer. They were very enthusiastic, but generally voiced frustration in getting the knowledge to spread across the full faculty.

Communication. Our interviews were liberally dotted with comments about the value of just hearing others discuss their work. "It lets you know you're not alone," "you realize that what you're doing is okay," and "you can always pick up a few tidbits to take back to your class" were representive statements. Wrapping these cherished moments within the framework of a specific instructional topic became a powerful means of engendering greater access and use of the information, and the power of communication opportunities was augmented by having a mix of formal and informal forums. The formal situations insured that discussion could occur; the informal enabled staff members to probe application issues that either they did not have time for in formal settings or they were uneasy about bringing up "in public." The combination of both let people know, almost every time they turned around, that improvement was both expected and "okay." The combination also boosted the number of occasions when staff members could "try out" and agree on common terminology for labeling classroom actions and consequences.

Both Districts 1 and 2 supported formal and informal communication vehicles that touched on all staff members. District 1 enabled both to occur mostly between teachers and administrators, through the required staff development activities, curriculum review committees, and the high number of informal central office observations of teachers. District 2, on the other hand, balanced the formal situations involving both administrators and teachers with a lot of chances for teachers to talk with one another, either as team members or peer coaches. Districts 3, 4, and 5 also had a mix of opportunities, but rarely did the same group of teachers have both. That is, not all teachers that attended formal meetings had the chance to talk in their buildings with others who were interested in and/or had accessed that same information. Similarly, teachers with considerable opportunities to talk informally with one another may or may not have have availed themselves of professional development activities.

Conclusion

Our assumption is that the extent to which important bodies of instructional knowledge permeate schooling makes a substantial difference in whether school districts ultimately are successful in enabling all students to become successful learners. Thus, improving educators' access to and use of this information is an intermediate -- but critical -- step on the way to reducing the "luck of the draw" in assigning students to buildings and classrooms as a major influence on which students become successful because more students will likely encounter classroom situations in which the understandings and skills needed to engage them and enable them to succeed are present. We conclude (1) that the central office's role in instructional improvement is most effectively enacted through giving a consistent and clear message that instruction and its improvement is the primary expectation for adults in the system and (2) that the consistency of this message is a function of involvement, support, and communication.

Involvement, support, and communication are probably overworked descriptors of what instructionally effective central offices do. Yet, the educators we studied pointed to the instructional improvement salience of these factors time and time again. But, the educators warned sternly that it was not enough for some administrators to occasionally be involved; the power of involvement drew strength from the multi-faceted participation of all administrators. Educators cautioned that general central office support for diverse and after-school professional development activities, while welcomed, fell short as a promotor of district-wide improvement; it took during-the-day, focused activities to channel enthusiasm and effort into a common direction. Educators appreciated an occasional chance to talk with one another, but they demonstrated convincingly to us that it took frequent formal and informal discussion opportunities for more than cursory use of new ideas to occur. Finally, educators were unequivocal in saying that widespread administrator involvement, focused allocation of resources, and multiple communication vehicles all had to be combined to generate a consistent message that instructional improvement was the local priority.

Missing, of course, is whether or not the successful playing of this role actually benefitted students. The absence of evidence, we feel, is more the result of too vague understandings of what successful learning is and too narrow a set of tools for measuring it. Teachers were reluctant to limit the broad array of affective, cognitive, and social student outcomes they saw as important to what could be measured but had no way other than individual anecdotes to claim student attainment of these outcomes. A significant challenge for school districts will be to define the student characteristics they hope to affect through instruction and what the learning behaviors are that lead to those characteristics. Once those are established, then and only then can the link between learning and educators' access to and use of instructional knowledge be convincingly made.

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